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ABSTRACT

Assertion training should be an integral part of preservice teacher training so that, when beginning teachers enter the classroom, they will be confident and able to establish a positive learning climate and minimize discipline problems. A graduate course was developed to assist teachers to develop assertive communication and to use assertive beliefs and strategies to enhance the learning environment and maintain effective classroom discipline. The class had four components: (1) self analysis of communication style, strengths, and weaknesses; (2) introduction to basic assertive training strategies and problem solving; (3) development of individual discipline plans; and (4) behavior rehearsal, using role-playing to improve or refine technique. Assertiveness training concentrates on rights-oriented communication, and attempts to develop respect for students, school staff, and administrators while emphasizing the need for self-respect. By assisting teachers to communicate in an atmosphere in which respect is valued, assertion training can help prevent discipline problems from occurring in the classroom. (FG)

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ASSERTION TRAINING: A TOOL FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

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ASSERTION TRAINING: A TOOL FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

Eavesdrop for a moment on a teachers' lounge just after fliers advertising a course called Assertiveness for Teachers have been distributed:

> "Assertiveness for Teachers! Just what we need! More stuff on how to communicate with kids. What I'd like is something to keep them in their seats with their mouths shut."
>
> "Well, someone I knew took a workshop about assertive discipline once and he thought it really worked. I really don't have much trouble with discipline, but I sure could use some help with three or four students who just don't get any work done. I wish someone would come up with a course on fighting apathy."
>
> "Or, how about a course to get principals and deans to back you up when you do have a troublemaker or two? That's when I feel helpless--when I have problems and the administration leaves me high and dry."
>
> "Yeah! I just wonder what bright ideas that course could give me for dealing with a parent who looks me in the eye and tells me that he knows his kid would never cheat when I've just shown him the evidence that his kid did cheat."
>
> "Well, if I thought I could find a course that would help me keep Herbie Henderson in his seat instead of running wild, I'd sign up in a minute!"

The idea of teaching teachers to behave more assertively tends to meet with mixed reactions initially; however, each of the above comments illustrates a common concern which teachers who enrolled in Assertiveness for Teachers addressed during the course. In teaching teachers to be more assertive, it becomes clear that they can become more confident of their ability to solve problems which have previously caused difficulty in their role as teachers.

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As the teachers worked in the class to develop skills to understand their problem and to develop solutions satisfactory to them, one frequent comment seemed to stand out above others: "I wish I'd had this course before my first year of teaching." In a follow-up survey of the 84 teachers who completed the graduate level class, teachers were asked, "Now that you've had a chance to teach for a year after taking the assertiveness class, would you consider assertion training to be a useful requirement for prospective teachers?" The response was 93%, yes; 7%, no. Those who answered "no" indicated that they felt it would be good for students to have it, but they were hesitant to require only assertive discipline. Their suggestion was to require a course in discipline which included assertive discipline. Those who answered "yes" gave reasons such as "It will increase their self-confidence" and "It will make them think through what they want before they get into the classroom."

In the past, it was often assumed that the first year teacher would learn about discipline and motivation on the job and that the teacher educator's main role was to teach more theoretical content. If young teachers are to survive in today's competitive job market, however, they will need to demonstrate that they have skills in and an understanding of basic discipline and communication strategies. From the first day of student teaching, to the job interviews, and into the first year of teaching, the young teacher will need to demonstrate confidence in his/her ability to establish a positive

learning climate and to minimize discipline problems. It is the writer's contention that assertion training will be of assistance in developing the necessary confidence.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to review basic concepts taught in the course, Assertiveness for Teachers, showing how the assertive philosophy and strategies are applicable to a positive classroom interaction; and (2) to examine how assertion training might assist prospective teachers to be better prepared for their first year of teaching.

Assertiveness for Teachers -- Review of Basic Concepts

First, it is necessary to give a basic overview of the course and how it was taught, although this is not intended to suggest that a course exactly like this should be included in a teacher preparation curriculum. Second, the actual content of assertion training and its relation to teaching will be reviewed.

Format of the Course

Assertiveness for Teachers, a 4-semester-hour graduate course, was taught as a concentrated summer workshop, meeting for 6 eight-hour days. Four separate sections were offered and a total of 84 students enrolled in the classes, with each section limited to a maximum of 24.

The course description was as follows:

> A workshop which is designed to assist teachers to develop assertive communication and to use assertive beliefs and strategies to enhance the learning environment and maintain effective classroom discipline.

It should be pointed out that the class was not designed to be a class only in assertive discipline similar to the workshops done by Lee Canter, author of Assertive Discipline. Instead, it was designed to be more similar to Lange and Jakubowski's (1976) assertiveness training procedures, with special focus on the needs of classroom teachers. Certainly, Canter's Assertive Discipline was used in reference to classroom discipline, but other sources were used in relation to classroom communication.

There were actually four separate components of the class. The first was devoted to an analysis of the basic beliefs of the assertive philosophy and an examination of the three basic styles of communication, the beliefs underlying each style, and the response of others to the respective style. In this segment, each person was asked to write an analysis of his/her own style of communication, assessing strengths and weaknesses and identifying classroom situations which required special attention.

The second component of the class utilized basic assertion training strategies as outlined by Lange and Jakubowski (1976). In this segment, students were introduced to a rational emotive approach to problem-solving and to a variety of specific communication strategies to enable them to more effectively communicate their wants and needs, particularly in school situations.

The third segment of the course was a study of Canter's Assertive Discipline (1977), which focuses specifically on the problem of discipline. Students were assisted to develop a complete discipline plan,

tailored to their own teaching situation. The discipline plan included specific rules, a hierarchy of consequences, a set of systematic positive reinforcers, and a specific plan for record keeping.

The final component of the class required each student to do a behavioral rehearsal of a problem of their choice. Essentially, it involves techniques described by Lange and Jakubowski (1976) which involve roleplaying a specific problem while being video-taped, receiving peer and instructor feedback on both strengths and weaknesses, and roleplaying again to try to improve or refine the initial effort.

Basic Concepts of Assertion

To understand assertion training as a possible ingredient of a teacher education curriculum, it is necessary to examine more closely some of the basic concepts taught in the first component of the course, the attitudes and beliefs of assertiveness. First of all, it must be established that assertive behavior reflects more than a set of communication strategies or techniques. Instead, as Alberti and Emmons (1978) point out, it is a set of attitudes or beliefs about the rights and responsibilities of human beings. They point out that in terms of basic human rights in interpersonal relationships, each individual has the same fundamental rights as the other.

According to Lange and Jakubowski (1976), "Assertion involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights" (p. 7). Respect for oneself and respect for others are

keys to an assertive philosophy. Assertion training for teachers attempts to develop attitudes of respect for students, teachers, administrators, and other school staff while at the same time emphasizing the need for self respect.

A second key concept relates to the need for each individual to feel personally responsible for directing his/her own life so that his/her wants and needs are met, while at the same time accepting others' personal rights to strive to meet their own needs. This is a particularly important concept for teachers. Canter (1977) clearly considers this to be important for teachers, as he indicates in the following quotation:

> It is only when a teacher takes seriously her own needs, wants and feelings that she will be able to feel good about herself as an individual and as a teacher. (p. 2)

Essentially, to be assertive is to accept personal responsibility for one's own needs and desires. In a classroom, the assertive teacher must accept personal responsibility for establishing an acceptable climate for learning.

Individuals must also be assisted to recognize their own fundamental human rights as well as the rights of others. Rights which are usually mentioned include the right to self respect, to express feelings and opinions, to try to meet needs, to take responsibility for one's actions, and to decide whether or not to live up to someone else's expectations.

Canter (1977) spells out three teacher rights which he believes will help teachers meet their needs in the classroom:

1. The right to establish a classroom structure and routine that provides the optimal learning environment in light of your own strengths and weaknesses.

2. The right to determine and request appropriate behavior which will meet your needs and encourage the positive social and educational development of the child.

3. The right to ask for help from parents, the principal, etc., when you need assistance with a child. (p. 2).

The next step is to develop the awareness that others have the same rights and that no one as an individual has a right to violate another's rights. Canter (1977) has identified specific student rights which directly involve the teacher. He says that the child has the right to:

1. Have a teacher who is in a position to and will help the child limit his inappropriate self-disruptive behavior.

2. Have a teacher who is in the position to and will provide the child with positive support for his appropriate behavior, and

3. Choose how to behave and know the consequences that will follow. (p. 8).

Given a rights-oriented philosophy, it is now possible to identify three distinct styles of communication: non-assertive, aggressive (hostile), and assertive. Non-assertive communicators allow others to violate their rights in order to maintain or gain others' approval. Aggressive (hostile) communicators violate others' rights by attacking, humiliating or demeaning them in order to maintain a sense of personal control or power. Assertive communicators neither allow their rights

to be violated or violate others' rights. Instead, they communicate in a manner which respects both themselves and others, and in times of needs conflicts, strive for mutually acceptable solutions to problems. Assertive communication affords the individual the full range of emotional reactions, but if negative feelings are to be expressed, they are expressed in terms of the individual's behavior and its effects, rather than through demeaning the individual's worth.

Canter (1977) describes an assertive teacher as:

> One who clearly communicates her wants and needs to her students, and is prepared to reinforce her words with appropriate actions. She responds in a manner which maximizes her potential to get her needs met, but in no way violates the best interests of the students. (p. 9)

In assertion training, the effects of each style of communication are pointed out. Nonassertion, for example, frequently results in the receiver's manipulation, disrespect, and gameplaying, all of which are potentially demaging in a classroom setting. Aggression, on the other hand, leads to defiance, resistance, or apathy and unwillingness to work, again negatively influencing the learning climate.

In contrast to the other two styles, assertive communication allows direct and specific communication about wants and needs while the receivers of the communication feel respected and informed. In a classroom, assertiveness allows the teacher to let the student know that "she means what she says and says what she means" (Canter, 1977, p. 9). The person who communicates while showing respect for the rights of all concerned is then more likely to be able to follow through on initial statements and to back up words with actions.

Once the concepts or rights-oriented communication have been introduced, the actual teaching of communication techniques such as I-messages, broken record responses, limit-setting, etc., naturally follows; however, the emphasis must constantly be on the attitudes and beliefs that underlie the communication more than on what words and phrases are used. It is an understanding of the attitudes that fosters assertion.

Canter's assertive discipline is based on the concepts of assertion which have been described, but focuses predominantly on strategies for classroom discipline. He advocates planning ahead for the desired student behaviors, clearly stated, purposeful rules, and systematic use of positive reinforcement and negative consequences to back up the rules the teachers make. Discipline planning--i.e., knowing in advance the behaviors a teacher wants and how s/he is to get them--is the key to assertive discipline.

Assertion Training for Prospective Teachers

A frequent criticism of beginning teachers and of those students who are placed in clinical experience portions of teacher preparation programs is that they lack initiative and are too reticent about establishing their position in the classroom. The difficulty of making the transition from being a student with little authority to assuming the responsibility of being a teacher in charge of a classroom cannot be minimized. Even the clinical experiences prior to student teaching and the student teaching experience itself tend to emphasize to the prospective student his/her lack of full responsibility more than it

encourages him/her to assume responsibility. Although assertion training is certainly not a panacea for the problems of transition for prospective teachers, there do seem to the writer to be concepts in assertiveness which can help prospective teachers.

Assertion training seems, first and foremost, to be a source of increased self-confidence for prospective teachers. When the teachers in Assertiveness for Teachers were asked to name the most important benefit they felt from the class, over half of those surveyed after they'd been teaching for a year indicated that they felt greater self-confidence and were more comfortable in expressing their needs to students. Teaching prospective teachers that it is their right and responsibility to take charge of the classroom will, I believe, increase their confidence in doing so.

To paraphrase DeCharms (1971), prospective teachers can become more origins and less like pawns as a result of assertion training. DeCharms describes origins as being persons who feel in charge of their lives and believe that they have personal causation; that is, they feel they are the origin of their own behavior. Pawns, on the other hand, feel little or no control over their own destiny, blame luck or fate for their outcome and fail to take responsibility for their mistakes or credit for their successes. DeCharms (1971) found in research that it was possible to create behavior in people that was more origin-like through experiences in which individuals planned for their own successful achievement of goals and focused on creating their own images of success.

The teachers who were surveyed listed among the values that they saw in assertiveness for teachers the fact that prospective teachers could benefit from developing their own plans and testing them with fellow students and teachers prior to trying them out in an actual classroom of students. In addition, assertion training in general teaches that each of us is personally in charge of meeting our needs, a belief that is characteristic of the origin instead of the pawn. If teachers are to be successful, they will benefit from feeling that they are origins.

Additionally, prospective teachers who feel a sense of their own personal causation will be more likely, it seems, to create origin behaviors in their students. This will encourage students to be more self-directed and life-long learners who can benefit more fully from the school environment.

By assisting prospective teachers to communicate in an atmosphere which values respect, assertion training can help them prevent many discipline problems from occurring. Too often, beginning teachers desire student approval so much that they behave nonassertively instead of assertively, thus leading students to believe that they can easily take advantage of the situation. When this happens, gameplaying and teacher-testing may occur, forcing the teacher to take punitive action in order to prevent the class from getting out of control. Forced to take punitive action, the teacher then tends to lean toward more aggressive and hostile behavior. Aggressive behavior will then result in student defiance or student aggression. Thus, a cycle of student misbehavior forms which is difficult for even experienced teachers to break.

If, on the other hand, the prospective teacher is sophisticated enough to communicate assertively about classroom behavior from the beginning, s/he may not have to cope with as many potential discipline problems. Students who are communicated to from a position of respect, rather than from positions of power or powerlessness, are more likely to communicate assertively themselves. Where communication on the part of both teacher and student is assertive, whatever problems arise should be able to be solved constructively.

If a teacher is willing to communicate assertively about her expectations of students and to follow through with consequences for misbehavior and rewards for desirable behavior, the teacher can avoid the cycle which is described above. By using consistent follow-through communication early in the year, the teacher can lighten the disciplinary efforts for the remainder of the year. If a prospective teacher can fully understand the importance of doing early follow through with discipline, s/he will be much ahead of many more experienced teachers in the field.

Assertion training can assist prospective teachers to recognize the importance of planning for positive classroom behavior. One of the teachers in the graduate class commented, "How strange it is that I took all those courses on how to write good objectives and lesson plans, but not once did anyone mention that it was important to have a plan for discipline!" As a whole, the teachers in the graduate class showed on their follow-up survey that they considered discipline planning to be a very important concept which they learned from the class. Of the 40 teachers who were surveyed in the telephone survey, 38 indicated that this year,

which is at least one year after they completed the class, they used a discipline plan to start the year.

The teachers who were in the class were also asked to rate their satisfaction with their classroom discipline on a questionnaire completed during the first hour in class. They were asked the same question in the phone survey a year later. They were asked to rank their satisfaction with their classroom discipline during their most recent teaching year, with 5 meaning "Very Satisfied" and 1 meaning "Very Dissatisfied." The teachers' mean score for the first questionnaire was 3.78. Their mean score after the assertiveness class and a year of teaching was 4.70. Their questionnaire comments said that they felt they had better discipline when they used a plan.

The teachers who were surveyed also strongly advocated teaching prospective teachers to make a discipline plan. They feel that first year teachers need to feel prepared for any discipline problem and they believe that a plan can help prospective teachers have something to fall back on when the unexpected occurs.

Prospective teachers will have the feeling from having made a discipline plan that discipline problems are a normal part of teaching that can be coped with in much the same way that student learning problems can be handled. A good discipline plan should be an insurance against the panic that beginning teachers feel when they are confronted with their first serious student misbehavior.

Prospective teachers should feel more capable of contributing to students' sense of self-worth and positive motivation as a result of assertion training. On the initial questionnaire, the teachers in

Assertiveness for Teachers were asked to identify their biggest problem as a teacher. The answer given most frequently was not discipline problems, but instead, student motivation. Of particular concern to many experienced teachers is the problem of motivation.

While teaching prospective teachers to be more assertive is not in and of itself likely to increase student motivation, there is some evidence that by giving students a feeling that they have control over their own behavior, that they are choosing freely from several alternatives, then they are more likely to be motivated to achieve success.

Assertive discipline includes the concept that a student has a right to choose the behavior he prefers. Limit setting techniques tell students what their choices are and what the consequences of their choices will be and leave the choice up to them.

Where students feel that their ideas and opinions will be given respect, there is a greater likelihood that they will grow in self esteem than if their ideas are not expressed. Prospective teachers who have studied assertion will be more likely to communicate respect and to value the student's ideas and his/her right to express them.

Prospective teachers should learn from assertion training skills in interacting with other educators and with parents. In the past, beginning teachers were encouraged to stay somewhat aloof from parents and administrators until they became more confident of themselves. When the time came that it was necessary to involve parents or administrators, the teacher tended to feel s/he had failed because the problem was not handled in the classroom.

Canter (1977) maintains that the teacher should consider it a right to seek help as needed from others who are involved in the process of education. Some students, he maintains, require a team approach. Moreover, he spells out specific suggestions for making parent conferences a productive experience and suggests safeguards which a teacher can take to keep administrators informed of his/her policies, thus making their support more likely.

As in any organization, communication with fellow professionals can be less professional than one might hope. However, by introducing a prospective teacher to rights-oriented communication, it may be possible to assist them to think more objectively about unprofessional behavior.

While I recognize that teacher education programs are crowded full with efforts to prepare teachers for a demanding position, I am convinced that somewhere in the existing curriculum are a few extra hours that can be devoted to exposing prospective teachers to assertion training. It just may represent a survival skill that is much needed in the world which confronts the teacher of today and tomorrow.

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